

newsmaker

PEOPLE MAKING NEWS

Retired Air Force General Norman R. Seip: Expanding High-Quality Pre-K is a Matter of National Security

PRESCHOOL MATTERS | 6

Over the years, the ranks of those advocating for expanding public pre-K have grown as economists and business leaders made the case that providing all kids with a high-quality early education is essential to America's future competitiveness. Now a growing list of the nation's top military leaders say doing so is also a matter of national security. Having served as a Lieutenant General in the Air Force, including a command of 46,000 airmen assigned to 12th Air Force, General Norman R. Seip is intimately acquainted with what it takes to organize, train, and equip our armed forces so they can defend against threats to our nation. He is also a leader of Mission: Readiness, which advocates for improving the quality of and access to preschool education. He answered these questions from *Preschool Matters*:

Q: Why did you and fellow retired military leaders decide to form Mission: Readiness?

A. While our military remains strong and prepared, we are concerned about the downward trajectory of readiness among our young people. There is a growing deficit of skills and fitness among our young people that threatens our military readiness, as well as our country's ability to compete on other levels in the private sector as well. In fact, as we've reported



in a series of research reports, 75 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are ineligible for service in the Armed Forces. Those of us who have had the privilege of leading our military feel we have identified a serious problem, and we want to affirmatively address it in a serious way.

We have the experience to understand the problem and analyze solutions, and we believe that we can help forge a policy solution. So we have formed Mission: Readiness to bring our experience to bear on this trou-

bling set of issues. "Readiness" refers both to our military's capacity as well as the need for us to get the upcoming generations ready for our challenging world. In order to elevate this set of issues among policymakers and the public, we need organizational capacity and staff to help us, and we are building our organization with the help from staff and important seed money from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Birth to Five Policy Alliance.

Q: How many of the young people who seek to enlist in the military have to be rejected because they aren't adequately educated?

A. In terms of rejection rates, lack of education or basic academic skills is a major factor. As I said, approximately one out of four young Americans can't join because he or she lacks a high school diploma. Even among those who have graduated or received their GED, 30 percent are disqualified because they fail the military entrance exam on math and reading skills.

Q: What can pre-K do to help solve the problem?

A. We have now done a substantial amount of research and have published reports at the national level and in several states about the problems facing the military. (You can see these on our Web site: www.missionreadiness.org.) Early education, and pre-kindergarten in particular, should be a central strategy for addressing the readiness issue. Pre-K helps in two ways: first, the evidence that high-quality pre-K can aid school success and increase graduation rates is pretty impressive. Second, the long-term benefits of pre-K, in terms of the social development part of early education, are really important to military commanders because this is where we get

the ability of our enlisted personnel to be good team players and have the ability to interact constructively with others and control emotions and behaviors. Additionally, the evidence that pre-K reduces crime over time is a great benefit for us also. Currently about 10 percent of our recruitment rejections are related to young people who have a felony or serious misdemeanor on their record.

Q: Have the armed services ever had to lower their standards to obtain enough recruits?

A. I am very proud of the talent and commitment of the young men and women in uniform. I witnessed countless acts of bravery and courage during my time in the Air Force. Our standards are high because we clearly cannot have people in our command who are not up to the job. Too many lives depend on it. That said, especially when the economy is strong and recruitment more challenging, we issue a greater number of waivers for things like GEDs or criminal misdemeanors if an individual seems like an especially good candidate. There are also times that we make exceptions to give some recruits on the margin the chance to prove themselves, especially in the area of physical fitness, which is a big problem for us since so many young people are just so out of shape.

Q: Judging from the footage of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it looks as if our troops are being asked to perform more complex tasks than in the past. Is that true and if so, what does that say about our recruiting standards?

A. There is no question that our troops are dealing with a more complex set of tasks and tools than ever before, and that trend will continue. Fortunately, many of our recruits also come with new talents from working with information technology, so our training is aided by that. But clearly, the academic preparedness of recruits will remain an essential ingredient of our qualifications. And my sense is that as we move forward, a high school degree in itself will not suffice—recruits need the actual knowledge and skills to do the job.

Q: Some worry that the younger generation of Americans, whether well-educated or not, may be insufficiently resilient to cope with hardships such as those encountered in military training. Is that something you see?

A. That has not been my experience. In my command overall, as well as my service in support of operations in Iraq, the troops I saw were completely up to the task, both physically and in terms of their ability to deal with the stress and complexity of the mission.

Q: How are the armed services doing at the moment in terms of filling their recruiting quotas?

A. We are doing fine at present. We are making our goals but do have to really push to achieve that because we're only drawing from 25 percent of the rising generation's members, and we are using a lot of incentives to make that happen. Frankly, we are aided by the high unemployment in the private market, which makes military service seem more attractive. But a weak economy is no formula for filling the ranks of a strong military. As I said in the beginning of this interview, the warning flags are out about what the future holds in terms of finding enough of the right men and women to keep our military ready for the many challenges that I am sure we are going to face.

Q: What if we ever had to re-institute the draft?

A. That is a decision for the civilian leadership to make in consultation with the Department of Defense. Personally, I prefer a volunteer military because it ensures that we are drawing on young people who have a bias for personal discipline, action, and service to others. Additionally, if we provide the right environment for talented young people to pursue their goals, we'll attract the talent we need to lead and serve in our military and protect our nation. But, getting back to basics, if we don't develop the foundation

for our young people—especially those at risk of failing—so they get the right start in life, then it won't just be our military that pays the price, our nation will suffer also.

One thing I would like to add, is a personal reflection about this whole issue of recruitment and qualification. Clearly, the military is not for everyone. But for my fellow members of Mission: Readiness and me, serving our country was a wonderful experience of learning, friendship, challenge, and satisfaction of a job well done. It just pains me to think that there are so many young people out there, for whom the job and the service would mean so much—for whom it's a ticket to the middle class and the American dream—who do not have the skills or the training to qualify. There will always be people who will not be able to compete or have the skills that we need, but we are clearly making a big mistake if we skimp on the investment in the upcoming generations—not just in terms of the needs of the military, but for our country that needs the contribution of all our citizens. ■